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THE CONGO ON THE WAY TO THE FUTURE

Attempt to Apply Practically the Theories of W. W. Rostow
(Belgian Congo)

/Translation/

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FOREWORD

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THE CONGO ON THE WAY TO THE FUTURE
Attempt to Apply Practically the Theories of W. W. Rostow
(Belgian Congo)

La Presse Africaine

Author: Charles Francois

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I. Sociological Theories and Their Utility
Traditional Objections to Social, Political, and Economic Theories

The greater part of the public regards theorists as insufferable bores. This view is held even by many government officials, industrialists, financiers, and politicians, who are carrying out with differing degrees of success various functions for society.

They regard any theory as suspect because it does not seem to have practical applications and because they do not know what use they could make of it in their professions or in the management of their affairs. Moreover, they reproach theories as coming after the events and explaining everything a posteriori.

These objections have now lost all validity in the field of physical sciences. Everyone knows today that Einstein was a man as important historically as Lenin or Churchill, and no one denies any longer the enormous material results of his theories and of those developed by his emulators and successors. The scientist is no longer, in the eyes of the masses, the gentle intellectual, absent-minded and unimportant, that he formerly was. Today he is considered a magician with diabolical and unlimited powers, which is another exaggeration.

Public skepticism still exists, however, with regard to the human sciences. Political economy, particularly, has had a really excessive consumption of theories, and there have been uncountable difficulties and crises of all kinds which have affected nations in direct contradiction with the ideas of economists of the time, or at least, were never predicted. The most noteworthy was the great crisis of 1929 to 1940 and all the consequences that followed it.

This, it seems, is well-deserved skepticism.

And yet, from Adam Smith to J. M. Keynes, no analysis of the economic, political, and social system has been incorrect with regard to a limited period of history. The world of Malthus, the world of Marx, the world of Lenin, have really existed at a particular moment, and there was at the time no better explanation of the events than the explanations put forward by them.

Even in our time, a large part of these old analyses is still valid and useful for explanation in special circumstances or in particular regions. It is only in their general aspects, too much adapted to their particular period, that they have become out-of-date.

Moreover, they fit rather remarkably with one another.

Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus contradict one another on certain points, but on the whole they complete and explain one another if one is careful to refer to the conditions of life of their time.

Marx also, in spite of appearance, does not contradict the economic and social thought prior to his. His great innovation is especially to have perceived that, in the last two or three centuries, economic evolution has not proceeded by cycles but has become irreversible.

His great error is to have closed his system upon itself in making himself the slave of some hypotheses that have been found to be weak.

All of his successors, Marxist theorists or non-Marxists, have enlarged their field of investigation in the measure the political, economic, and social field has been extended.

Marx has been, in a certain sense, the Newton of economics and sociology. The difference is that laws of human science study dynamic variations whereas those of physics establish - or attempt to establish - invariant relations.

For matter that is moving, there must therefore be an adaptable theory.

If this condition is not fulfilled, laws can be made for phenomena of the past, but it is not possible to predict what will happen in the future.

This was seen by the great Communist theorists: Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung, who have never hesitated to reinvent Marxism by giving it new interpretations corresponding to the needs of the societies in their charge.

Of course, the real scientific mind has a definite distrust of "adaptable" theories, fearing they will become simply "elastic". It is necessary to take precautions against this real danger.

Adaptability of Human Sciences

What should be changed in the theories of human sciences?

Essentially they should be revised and extended to permit them to absorb new facts and to explain the transformations in the world.

This requirement goes beyond those imposed on the theories of physics. The latter must also yield to new facts, but the physical world is unchanging. Water, under normal conditions, is always transformed into ice at zero degrees centigrade, and the different conditions that can be created have definite characteristics that are always the same.

Relations between social and economic facts do not have this invariability. The facts themselves are unique in a much deeper sense than those of physical sciences. They are never exactly comparable. Their complexity is too great, and it is hardly possible, in our time, to imagine a social or economic system that is completely closed. This is indeed a characteristic of the contemporary period.

Comparison of Marx and Rostow permits us to understand better this complex process of revising theories in human sciences.

Rostow generalizes Marx and his successors. He puts them in agreement with non-Marxist economists such as Keynes. To obtain this result, he frees original Marxism from certain assumptions that have been shown to be weak by the evolution of history. Marx, thus revised and corrected, is stronger and less open to question, despite the views of certain modern Marxists who consider themselves orthodox. He joins Smith, Malthus, and others already reconsidered before him, and becomes a part of the foundations for modern economic and social theory.

This work of re-evolution shows what is the element of weakness in a theory. This element is the abuse of paralyzing assumptions that close the theorist in the present and in a preconceived view of the future. What every theory necessarily neglects is man's inventive character, which always upsets the established order and through its unpredictability causes confusion to the most penetrating minds.

The human sciences draw their inspiration from life and reality, but have difficulty in distinguishing between what is temporary and what is durable and permanent in human events. Excessive attachment to what is temporary makes them subject to ridicule with regard to what is permanent, and the opposite is also true.

How can such a dilemma be avoided?

To succeed, it is necessary, from the beginning, to determine the limits of the validity of assumptions.

This is what Rostow does very well.

He does not pretend to have laid the groundwork for a new political economy or for a renewing of human sciences. He simply sets forth a theory as to the stages of growth of nations from the stage of underdevelopment to what we regard today as the stage of complete development.

The scope of this theory is therefore quite limited as to time. It applies only to the analysis of the first stage, that of traditional societies, up to the eighteenth century. Its validity and its reality continue to increase until the present time, and it is exactly the tool that we need today.

But in fifty years the process it describes will be completed, at least in its present forms. It will have been diverted in a new direction, or will be merged in a more vast phenomenon that we do not understand today, although this phenomenon may have begun already under our eyes. We do not understand it for the same reason that our parents understood nothing of the evolution of colonial societies, which was beginning in their time.

Rostow will therefore be revised and corrected one day, like his predecessors.

But the work he has accomplished, in addition to its interpretative value and its immediate usefulness, provides an excellent lesson of methodology in human sciences and brings us nearer to the satisfactory condition for establishing fundamental rules for the explanation of human behavior - namely, for the development of theories.

III. The Congo, Society in Transition

The Fundamental Disturbance

If we use the tests of Rostow, the Congo appears to be already in the stage of a society in transition.

This becomes evident at once when we consider the present situation.

The essential characteristic of the present situation is that it has ceased to be static. The Congo has definitely entered on its evolution and nothing can stop it. This is not the work of some progressionists resolved to make the country into a modern nation by an abstract decree of the mind.

On the contrary, it is the unconcerted and probably unforeseen result of a method of economic "exploitation" which was endeavoring to reach its own objectives but has at the same time achieved a number of others more or less compatible with the first. The reasoning of our financiers and industrialists has, as usual, been too mechanical. It would have been perfect in a world of automaton, but is far from perfect in a country inhabited by human beings. This is an old story that has already been observed elsewhere; it was used by Marx himself in constructing his vision of the world (although even Marx succumbed to the mechanistic illusion).

No society can evolve unless it is first placed in a condition of fundamental disequilibrium that it is trying to overcome by readjustment. And the evolution can proceed only if the readjustment fails to re-establish a static equilibrium, for internal or external reasons.

It is absolutely necessary here to understand the difference between historical evolution in a closed cycle and the other kind, which does not turn back on itself and never passes the same point twice (the idea of the cycle has not disappeared from contemporary history but has changed in character under the influence of technical progress). The first is characteristic of an economic system where the means of existence revolve continually around an average that is always approximately the same. A society subject to such a system is turning in a circle and passes and repasses periodically through vicissitudes of the same kind.

A cycle of this kind can be broken only by a new technical factor: the introduction of continual intellectual progress and all that results from it. Tradition political disruptions: replacement of a dynasty or an empire, invasions, wars as they were known in antiquity or the middle

ages, make no fundamental change in the historical situation. The condition of the people as a whole is not improved or made worse in a durable manner, since agricultural production and the output of artisans are not permanently affected.

If the Belgians had brought to the Congo only a system of colonialist exploitation, they would have simply superimposed themselves upon an existing economic and social regime without changing it profoundly. Upon their eventual departure the country would return to its traditional state.

But this is far from being the case, and the most extremist leaders realize that more is involved than a simple political question, that the latter is only a preliminary step in a general transformation that is much more vast and more far-reaching in its consequences.

Few persons, in Africa and in Europe, understand the profound nature of the fundamental disturbance that has occurred, but everyone sees clearly that it has occurred. This is what is expressed when speaking of the Congo as an "underdeveloped country".

What is meant by "underdeveloped country"?

The expression "underdeveloped" is frequently appearing in all the newspapers, but what does it mean exactly?

An underdeveloped country is one that is so regarded by comparison with the countries of Europe and America that are economically and socially advanced and are considered developed. In both cases, however, it is a question of a relative state.

All developed countries have attained differing degrees of development, and the underdeveloped countries are not all on the same level. It is possible to find in the world all degrees of evolution, from primitive tribes, living by hunting and gathering wild fruits, to the state of advancement in the United States.

We must therefore try to find an objective measure of underdevelopment.

As a summary of the numerous studies made on the subject, we can draw up the following comparative table of the characteristics of underdeveloped countries and of developed countries:

| | Underdeveloped Countries | Developed Countries |
|-------------------|---|--|
| <u>Population</u> | at least 80% of the inhabitants living in rural areas population remaining more or less stationary high infant mortality rate | a rural population representing not more than 18 to 30% of the total after a very rapid increase, the population continues to increase slowly low infant mortality rate |
| <u>Economy</u> | Average span of life short or very short Subsistence economy, gathering of wild fruits, hunting, agriculture, and extensive animal husbandry. Production by artisans on a small scale No industry No power production No roads, railways, or canals Manual labor with low yield. Long working hours Low productivity Purchasing power very small and devoted solely to essential needs | Average life span attaining 60 years or more Disappearance of hunting and of gathering of wild fruits. High yield from agriculture and animal husbandry. Highly developed production by artisans Existence of basic industry (steel mills) and of numerous industries of transformation Numerous thermal and hydroelectric power plants Highly developed transportation system Highly mechanized production with high yield. Considerable reduction in working hours High productivity High purchasing power permitting wide range and variety of consumption |

| | Underdeveloped Countries | Developed Countries |
|--|---|--|
| <u>Economy</u> | In general, no economic progress. Shortage of supplies and occasional or periodic famines. | Continual progress interrupted by economic crises. Attempts are made to control these crises |
| <u>Social and Political Conditions</u> | <p>Large peasant class dominated by religious, military, or landholding aristocracies</p> <p>Close tribal solidarity or solidarity between people of the same village</p> <p>Family solidarity in the broadest sense</p> <p>Nonexistence of the second sector (masses of urban workers)</p> <p>Small numerical importance of the third sector</p> <p>Wars between clans. Wars of conquest</p> | <p>Representative regimes based on electoral systems and universal suffrage</p> <p>Individualism</p> <p>Grouping of individuals according to their class interests (trade unions) or their religious, philosophical and political ideas (political parties)</p> <p>Massive increase and then stagnation of the proletariat (urban industrial workers, 30 to 35%)</p> <p>Slow and continual increase of the third sector (administration, magistracy, army, teaching profession, artisans, leisure, tourism, liberal professions, fine arts) (tending to attain and exceed 50%)</p> <p>International wars. Sometimes revolutions or dictatorships</p> |

At What Stage is the Congo?

If the Congo is examined in the light of this small summary table, the following observations can be made:

From the point of view of population, the Congo, fifty years ago, was a typical underdeveloped country. Today, with 23% of the inhabitants living in the cities, with a population that has been increasing for several years, with an infantile mortality rate that is still high but declining, the Congo is little by little abandoning its former character. It has started on the road to progress, but has travelled much less than half of the way.

From the point of view of economic position, the Congo presents none of the characteristics of developed countries, but the features of underdevelopment remaining without any modification are rare.

The economy of subsistence is in retreat. It has not disappeared everywhere and completely, but is combining now to a certain extent with a beginning of a market economy, due to export crops, grown by the masses of the peasants and on large plantations.

The beginnings of industry are seen in the cities, and a modern Congo artisan class is in the embryonic stage in all parts of the country. Of course the Congo has no heavy industry. The case of Katanga is quite special. Mining of copper is for export, and this production cannot serve to build a heavy industry in the Congo, at least not directly.

Important developments have taken place with regard to power production.

Electrification is still only partially accomplished, but enormous progress has been made in the last ten years. Power consumption is far from approaching that of developed countries, but is definitely above that of many other underdeveloped countries.

The transportation system is one of the most promising features of the present situation of the Congo. Whereas the lack of transportation facilities ten years ago was paralyzing economic development, the situation today is completely reversed due to the construction of the KMK and of many new roads, and the efforts made to improve the Congo River and its tributaries.

All of these developments, however, have not been enough, on the whole, to raise output and productivity in a satisfactory manner. Consequently, except for a privileged part of the urban population (office employees, skilled workers), the great mass of the population disposes of very small individual incomes, permitting the satisfaction of only the most vital needs, and at times there is difficulty in meeting even these needs.

Although the country no longer has the scarcities of supplies and famines formerly experienced, the whole of the economic picture leads us to class the Congo definitely among the underdeveloped countries.

Social and political conditions in the country correspond to the economic situation.

Some features of the Congo of the future are beginning to be revealed here and there. The workers are tending to form groups, not according to ethnic origin, but according to their interests: they are forming trade unions. Political groups being formed show that the citizens are being regrouped according to their reactions to a new political and social situation. The political future of the country, as it continues to develop, will take account less and less of tribal appurtenances, and more and more of the great human attitudes toward progress.

Under labels conforming to the fashionable vocabulary, common to everyone and going beyond the idea of independence, we shall see taking form the three great styles of thought of modern man: extreme and revolutionary progressionism, moderate progressionism, and ultraconservatism of the reactionaries.

Tribal solidarity is losing ground slowly under our eyes, to the advantage of national solidarity, more vague, more abstract, but becoming more evident and having the future before it.

Likewise, the traditional aristocracies see their role diminishing, and will undoubtedly see it further reduced in the future, because the conditions that made their existence and action indispensable are slowly disappearing under the pressure of modernization.

In brief, the Congo, an underdeveloped country, has started on the road to progress, under our eyes, without our having been aware of it in the beginning.

The control that men have over events is counterbalanced by the control that events have over men. Present political movements are a result, predictable long ago, of the economic and social changes in the country caused by the arrival of the Belgians. It is a question of an irreversible phenomenon not at all dramatic in character if everyone makes the necessary effort to adapt themselves to the new situation and to obtain the benefits it is capable of bringing to us.